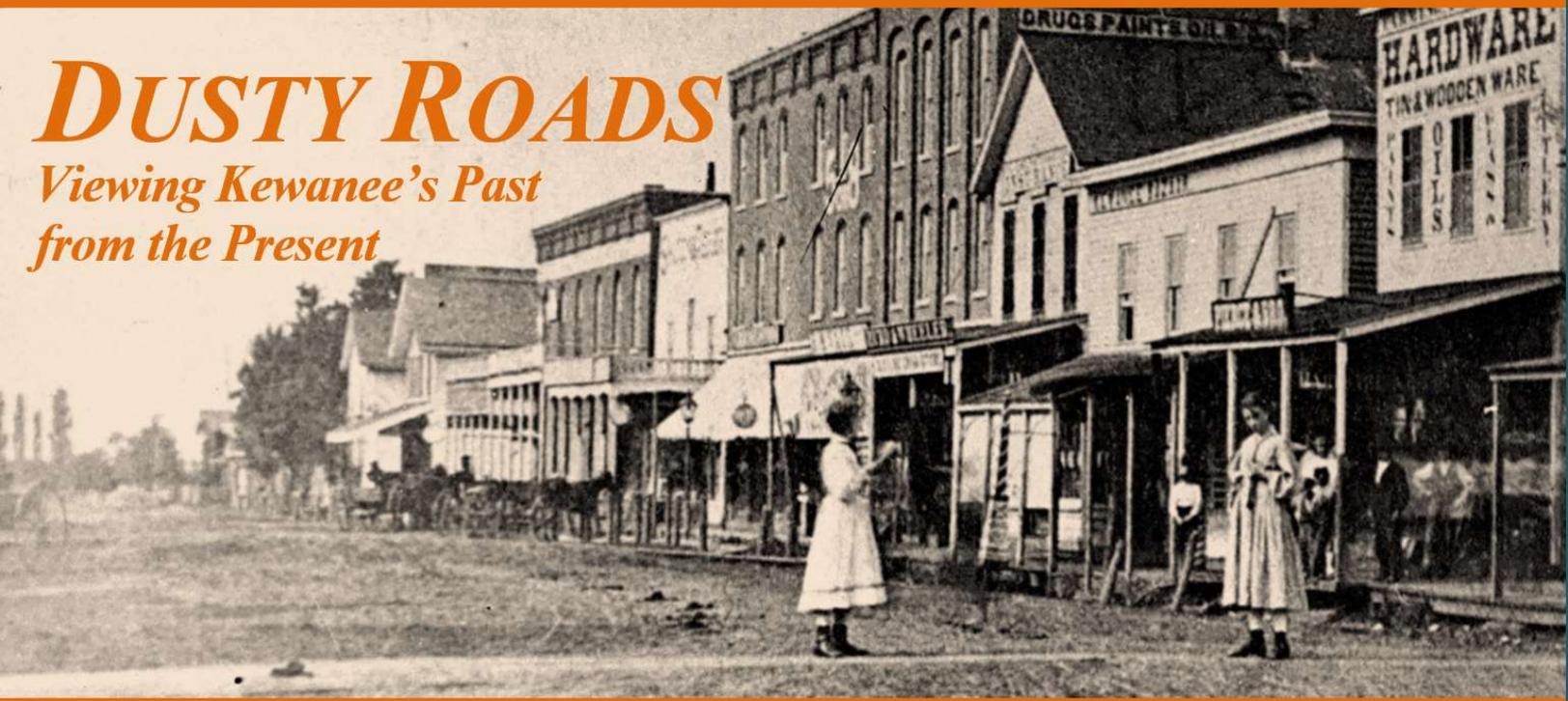


DUSTY ROADS

*Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present*



by Dean Karau

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The Kewanee Liquor Riot of 1856

But It Differed in a Significant Way from the April 21, 1855, Chicago Lager Beer Riot

In 1855, Chicago Mayor Levi Boone, a great-nephew of Daniel Boone, was a “Know Nothing” politician who tried to enforce the city’s liquor laws in a particularly harsh way, at least as perceived by the German and Irish immigrants who made up an increasingly large percentage of Chicago’s citizenry. Numerous arrests of violators of the laws led to a trial set for April 21. But on that afternoon, thousands of immigrants stormed the downtown area and battled with police. Shots were fired, skulls were bashed, and a number of injuries and a few deaths were reported. Two months after the Lager Beer Riot, Illinois defeated a prohibition law, and the Know Nothings were voted out of office in the next city election.

In 1856, temperance-related events took a decidedly different turn in the new village of Kewanee.

By 1856, our fledgling village was growing rapid-



Henry Klinkel's Lager Beer Saloon photograph

ly - around 1,200 souls lived in Kewanee and another 600 - 700 in Wethersfield. Kewanee boasted a bank and stores merchandising dry goods, clothing, drugs and medicines, jewelry, groceries and provisions, furniture and cabinets, boots and shoes, lumber, and books. There were tailors, a flouring mill, a saw mill, a large grain warehouse and elevator, a newspaper, lawyers, physicians, dentists, black-

smiths, carpenters, hotels, boarding houses, masons, tin shops, plow and harrow manufacturers, harness shops, paint shops, a brick yard, bakeries, a livery stable, and wheelwright shops.

There also were “four or five individuals, who have persisted in keeping in our midst their infernal dens of licentiousness, drunkenness and crime, which were fast drawing into our fatal snares our young men and women.”

Huh? Oh yeah, taverns and saloons, and liquor

and gambling.

four or five individuals, who have persisted in keeping in our midst their infernal dens of licentiousness, drunkenness and crime, which were fast drawing into our fatal snares our young men and women.

from an April 3, 1856, Chicago Tribune story on Kewanee

The events of spring 1856 in Kewanee seemed to coalesce around a cooper, Rufus H. Renoud, and an Irishman, James Gallagher, although the record is murky and somewhat conflicting.

Renoud was born around 1825 in Connecticut. He and his wife moved first to Pike, Illinois, and then to someplace near Kewanee shortly after its founding. Renoud kept a saloon on Tremont Street (which was described as “very little short of a canal” in wet weather). As a cooper, he was familiar with sources of liquor, and so he may also have been a distributor of sorts to the other Kewanee drinking establishments.

James Gallagher, was a founding member of St. Mary’s Catholic Church, organized in 1854 and whose place of worship was erected in 1855. But Jimmy also operated a business which sold liquor, “The Traveller’s Home,” located across the tracks.

Temperance elements in Kewanee took umbrage with the operation of these and other dens of iniquity in their midst, and took matters into their own hands.

Apparently a group of women first approached Renoud to demand he give up his persistent selling of liquor. When he refused and taunted them,

*“they brandished their hatchets and proceeded to open his cellar door and enter the room where his liquor was concealed. Renoud then walked into a back room, seized a double bar-
relled gun, loaded with ball, and entering the cellar, where the ladies by this time had com-
menced in earnest the work of cutting up hoops and staving in heads, drew up his gun, took de-
liberate aim, and ordered them out of his cel-
lar.*

“Some of them complied with this order, and he followed them up into his bar-room, which, by this time, filled with gentlemen who were attracted by the cry of the ladies, and who at once seized and disarmed him. The ladies then returned to the cellar and finished the utter demolition of every cask, jug and bottle supp-

osed to contain the ‘critter.’”

Renoud finagled to obtain a criminal indictment against the perpetrators, whose numbers included Mrs. H. L. Sloan, Mrs. G. W. Foote, Mrs. E. V. Bronson, H. G. Little, J. H. Howe, A. H. Pratt, J. V. Montgomery, George Rogess, Thomas Wiley, A. Thornton, Sr., Abram Thornton, Jr., Jon Maxon, and John Farmer.

But on the day those citizens were to appear at the courthouse in Cambridge, Renoud was indicted for selling liquor without a license and for keeping a gambling house, and Dr. E. Pinney, E. S. Church, A. D. Carson, W. S. Bryan, and James Collins were indicted for gambling at Renoud’s establishment. Renoud ultimately sold out and moved to Henry in Marshall County, apparently continuing as a cooper – it’s unknown whether he continued selling liquor.

Gallagher witnessed what happened to Renoud, and tried to avoid the same fate. He invited the temperance women to come to the Traveller’s Home to see him pour out his whiskey. They accepted the invitation and saw Gallagher dump his liquor.

But Gallagher apparently had filled those barrels with water, and he continued to sell his whisky. Ultimately, Gallagher was forced to see the errors of his way, and quit selling liquor in his establishment, as announced in a letter sent to the Henry County Dial

Great Excitement at Kewanee.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :

I requested you to attend at my place, the ‘Traveller’s Home’ in Kewanee, on the 26th of March, at 3 o’clock P. M., to witness the destruction of liquor, that I believed it deserved, after I so long contended with the citizens of Kewanee. But I came to the conclusion of resigning and forever quitting and abandoning that infamous ruination of man—that is real poison under the name of spirituous liquor.

For all the uneasiness that I caused the citizens of Kewanee in consequence of my selling liquor, I hope they will forgive me, and I return my sincere thanks to the ladies of Kewanee, for their respectful company on the 26th of March, and the good order they kept, and for their kind wishes for my welfare in future.

JAMES GALLAGHER.

Copy of letter to Kewanee’s Henry County Dial newspaper and appearing in the April 9, 1856, Moline Workman

newspaper. (According to the July 12, 1876, Kewanee Independent, Gallagher may have been persuaded to quit the business after being “given a free ride on a rail and tarred and feathered.”) Gallagher eventually left Kewanee for the West. But liquor establishments remained in Kewanee and, in fact, their numbers increased.

SALOONS.

BLOOMER J. N. se cor Chestnut and Railroad Square
Boland T. Railroad Square
Brady T. Railroad Square
Empson Wm. & Bro, es Tremont n Second
Handibode J. Railroad Square
Joderstrom L. Railroad Square
Katin T. ss Second r d w P O
MARTIN P. K. Railroad Square
O'NEIL M. Railroad Square
Priestman & Co. Railroad Square

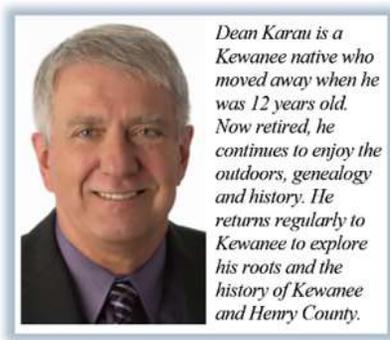
from the 1876 Kewanee City Directory

Kewanee went dry in the second decade of the 20th century, ahead of the Prohibition era. But even during those times, Kewaneeans who wanted to drink found many, albeit illegal, sources to quench their thirst. (My grandpa, and maybe yours, ran a still in the 1920s.)

Most Kewaneeans in the 1850s probably had yet to hear of Mark Twain. But many of them probably would have liked him instantly after they found out that at one time he said,

“Too much of anything is bad, but too much good whiskey is barely enough.”

To learn more about Kewanee and Wethersfield, past, present, and future, please visit my Facebook page, Dusty Roads, at <https://www.facebook.com/Dusty-Roads-103160191295142>



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